

Feeding People, Not Landfills

Podcast Transcript

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Rachel Bassler: How much of your food and money are you throwing away? Welcome to EPA's podcast on wasted food, a look at how our society can reduce waste, save money, and protect the environment.

I'm Rachel Bassler, with EPA, and joining me today are Mathy Stanislaus, Assistant Administrator for EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, and Pete Pearson, Director of Sustainability and National Accounts at SUPERVALU, Incorporated, a national grocery, retail, and pharmacy company. Thank you both for joining us.

Mathy, let's start with you, what is wasted food and why should we be concerned about it?

Mathy Stanislaus: Good question, Rachel. Wasted food isn't just the produce that's gone bad in your fridge because you forgot about it or didn't eat it in time. It includes uneaten food and food preparation scraps from households, restaurants, grocery stores, cafeterias, and industrial sources.

Wasted food poses a problem, not only because we generate so much of it but also because producing it has significant environmental and economic consequences. What's more, a lot of food that we throw out hasn't even gone bad, it's actually safe, wholesome food that we could – that someone could eat.

Rachel Bassler: Can you give us an idea of how much food we waste?

Mathy Stanislaus: Sure. The amount of food we waste in the United States is staggering. In 2010 we generated almost 35 million tons of wasted food. We recycled only 3% of that. The other 97% ended up in landfills and incinerators. That means that we threw away about 34 million tons of food, more food and food scraps go into landfills than any other type of material that we throw out. So there's great potential for all of us to help reduce, recover, and recycle wasted food.

Rachel Bassler: Those numbers are pretty astounding. What are the economic and environmental consequences of wasting so much food?

Mathy Stanislaus: Well, let's start with the economic consequences. Whether you're an individual or a family chances are a considerable portion of your budget goes towards buying food. That means we're throwing away a lot of money when we waste food.

Think about it this way, a recent study estimated that an American family of four throws away close to \$1,600 of food every year, and this doesn't take in account the cost of wasted food at grocery stores, universities, stadiums, and other retail venues, totaling close to \$65 billion.

As I mentioned earlier, wasting food also has monumental consequences. When excess food, leftover food, and food scraps are put in a landfill they decompose and become a significant source of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, with 21 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide, and the environmental impacts aren't limited to disposal.

Wasted food also wastes the fertilizer, water, and energy used to grow food and deliver to our communities. So it's important for our listeners to know that reducing wasted food benefits the environment, as well as their budget.

Rachel Bassler: What is EPA doing to help reduce wasted food?

Mathy Stanislaus: As part of our new way of thinking about how to capture the environmental and economic value of materials and foods EPA has launched what we call the Food Recovery Challenge. The Challenge encourages participating grocers, universities and stadiums to sustain and manage food by reducing the waste they generate, donating excess food and composting.

The Food Recovery Challenge helps industry to learn to purchase leaner and diverse surplus food away from landfills to local hunger relief organizations. It benefits participants in several ways, empowering them to improve their bottom line, supporting their community, and reducing their monumental footprint.

Rachel Bassler: Can you tell us more about how our society can effectively manage wasted food?

Mathy Stanislaus: Sure. The Food Recovery Challenge builds on EPA's food recovery hierarchy, which is really a way of prioritizing how to maximize food reuse. It's part of a shift that EPA is leading away from a waste management perspective to a lifecycle perspective.

The concept, which the EPA is championing through with sustainable materials management program, is to not only make good decisions about how to manage waste, but also look for opportunities to conserve resources and reduce waste across the entire lifecycle of materials. EPA has chosen food as one of several areas in which to show how applying a lifecycle approach can reduce waste, help our environment, and save money.

The food recovery hierarchy I mentioned shows we should reduce wasted food if we, one, generate less, two, donated excess food to food banks, soup kitchens or shelters. This is so important since over 14% of U.S. households are food insecure. Three, feed animals. Four, divert wasted food for industrial uses. This includes providing faster rendering, oil for fuel, recycling food scraps by composting, returning nutrients to the soil.

All these methods are more beneficial than throwing food in the trash. Some of these actions are most appropriate practiced by businesses and large organizations. Others are easily practiced by individuals. Individuals can also encourage the local grocers, universities and stadiums to join the Food Recovery Challenge.

Rachel Bassler: Great. Thanks, Mathy.

Pete, let's turn it to you for an industry perspective. SUPERVALU is a current Food Recovery Challenge participant. What steps has SUPERVALU taken to reduce wasted food?

Pete Pearson: I mean we've done a lot. First of all, SUPERVALU is a parent company of 10 regional grocery chains and in the West we're Albertson's, in the Midwest it's Hornbacher's, Cub Foods, Shop 'n Save, Save-a-Lot, Jewel Osco, and on the East Coast we're Shaw's, Acme, Shoppers, and Farm Fresh.

What we've done is we've created what we call our zero waste program across the entire enterprise, and it incorporates – really it's a change in culture, it's a new mindset for how we just don't waste anything anymore. Part of that, actually the biggest part of it, is getting all of our stores on a food diversion program.

And it's really two pieces. One of it is our Fresh Rescue Program, so donating as much as we can when appropriate to the local food banks. And then the second piece is finding either composting, waste to energy, or some type of organic food diversion to a secondary use, not just in the landfill.

Rachel Bassler: And what are some of the challenges SUPERVALU has faced when implementing programs to reduce wasted food?

Pete Pearson: One of the biggest, I think we have a great success story when it comes to our Food Bank Program, and one of the biggest challenges we have when we look for composting programs or waste to energy programs is simply community support. Our stores are obviously part of the communities that they're in, and unless a community has really made a concerted effort to go after a zero waste policy or to incorporate composting facilities or composting operations, it makes it very difficult for us to do that.

And so in that sense the places where we don't see those types of operations, like composting, we're huge advocates for it. We try to get our stores and our store leadership and our store associates involved in the community really advocating that we should focus on this. And because it is such a big priority for our company to make sure that we're doing this.

The other thing is that we're also looking for financial incentives, as well. One of the challenges is that if it's going to cost a lot more money for us to be composting or to be doing organic food diversion, we're probably not going to do it. It's a really fine line there, and what we've found is a lot of communities are being really smart about this, they're trying to provide those incentives to companies like ours, to where the costs are a little bit lower than what you'd pay to throw it in the landfill, to take it to landfill. And so right off the bat there's a great incentive to do it because we're saving money.

Rachel Bassler: Great. And how has SUPERVALU benefitted from its commitment to reduce wasted food? Is there a business case to be made, in addition to an environmental one?

Pete Pearson: There is most definitely a business case. The last two years SUPERVALU, as the parent company, we have made more money on our recycling income than we have spent in our landfill waste diversion. So I mean think about that for a minute, we're spending less money now, throwing things in a landfill, and we're making more money on recycling income. So most definitely, as soon as that breaking point happened our executive leadership and senior leadership in the company were very tuned into what this meant.

And I think it's very telling, I mean we are leading the way in a lot of communities. Chicago is one that comes to mind right now. I mean we are right there with the City of Chicago, trying to implement food recovery and waste – food waste diversion programs across the entire City, I mean we're talking hundreds of stores.

And we're benefitting not only because we're just doing the right thing, but we're also we're able to save financially and really place value on the entire waste stream because there is a tremendous amount of value in the waste stream.

Rachel Bassler: So, going along with that, how does the concept of the triple bottom line inform Super Value's approach to sustainable business practices? Does this idea inform SUPERVALU's work with local food growers and producers?

Pete Pearson: So, first and foremost, I mean over the last two years our Executive Team, we hold a quarterly kind of committee, called our Environmental Executive Steering Committee. And the triple

bottom line is very much a part of that every time we meet. I mean obviously profit comes into play and looking at how we can lower our expenses, but also plan and people. We're a very people centric organization. We're always looking to connect with our communities and connect with what's going on in our neighborhoods, America's neighborhood grocer, that's our – that's what we're about.

And then in terms of the environment, there's so many of these things that can have that environmental benefit and really places us in a really good position in the communities because we're catalyzing these. And especially with food waste, there is – there's a real need for businesses like ours because we have such a high volume of waste, when we commit to certain composting programs or food recovery programs it really makes a big difference, we're able to incubate businesses and incubate programs whereas smaller businesses probably couldn't have the same impact.

Now when we talk about local food and local growers, you know, this is a very interesting balance because we are a very large company, we have 1,100 grocery chains across the country. And I think we could always do a better job of connecting more to local farmers. The balancing point or the tough thing here is that we're big and we have to have a lot of volume, so there's this notion that the local growers can't give us all the volume we need and we can't get it at the exact time as we need it all the time. I mean 21st Century shoppers, they expect everything 12 months out of the year, and in some places you just can't get it 12 months out of the year.

The other big factor is that as we look to do more with local farmers and connecting with our stores that requires a lot more relationships to manage and so it's how better do we as a company manage those relationships, ensure that food safety and quality products come into the stores, those are always big factors to manage and something we try to improve all the time.

Rachel Bassler: And do you use any kind of green marketing practices at SUPERVALU? And, if you do, what benefits do you see from green marketing?

Pete Pearson: We've done a couple things. One we have videos that we've been publishing on YouTube and via social media campaigns. There's a great one out, you know, if you do a search on SUPERVALU Zero Waste, it'll highlight what we're doing in terms of our Zero Waste Program and Food Waste Diversion.

The other thing we're experimenting a lot with is actually getting really hyper focused on community involvement. There's two, in particular. We did a store remodel in Ashland, Oregon, and we did another remodel in Carpinteria, California. And in both cases, you know, our marketing teams and our environmental team we really tried to connect with what the community was doing. We called it Honoring The Community.

Both of them are very green communities, and in the case of Ashland we really – we talked about zero waste and making sure that we're good stewards in our store and not wasting energy, not wasting water, not wasting things going to landfill.

And in Carpinteria, California we have the first all-natural refrigerant system in the entire country for all of our case refrigeration, and that is a huge deal and it's something I'm happy to say that the communities all responded so amazing and they were so grateful. I mean we had people just almost emotional about it at some of the reopening events, and that is just amazing to see.

Rachel Bassler: Yes, thanks, Pete. That sounds really great.

So, Mathy, we're going to turn it back to you. We've heard how SUPERVALU has reduced wasted food,

how can individual consumers take similar steps to reduce wasted food, what practical things can consumers start doing today?

Mathy Stanislaus: Since about 40% of wasted food comes from individual consumers, each of us can really make a difference by reducing what we waste at home. We can minimize the amount of wasted food we generate, donate excess food to those in need, and compost food scraps.

Here's some tips to generate less wasted food for individual consumers and households. First, plan your menu and shop for those things on your menu. If you buy in bulk make sure to have a way to keep the food from spoiling before you use it.

Use up leftovers and donate food that's still fresh to your local food rescue, pantry or shelter to feed those in need. Recycle food scraps and yard trimmings into compost that feeds your yard and plants. Remember that a family of four wastes an estimated \$1,600 worth of food each year so following these tips will save you money.

Rachel Bassler: You've given us some great ideas about how individuals can reduce wasted food. What role can larger organizations play? How can grocers, universities, stadiums, and other venues reduce wasted food?

Mathy Stanislaus: Sure. Like SUPERVALU has done, one thing they could do is they can join the Food Recovery Challenge. The Challenge asks large organizations to set a goal for reducing the amount of food wasted, reaching landfills. To do this organizations begin by conducting a waste audit.

One Food Recovery Challenge participant describes a waste order as quote, one of the single most important things I've done in terms of waste management because it helps us manage cost, end quote.

Once grocers, universities, stadiums, and all the venues have conducted a waste audit and set a goal to reduce wasted food, there are a number of ways they can work towards achieving that goal. They can change their food purchasing, production, and handling practices. Venues that serve food can practice portion control, implement trailer dining practices, and modify menus to eliminate uneaten food. Groceries, universities, and stadiums can also divert food from landfills by donating food to those in need and composting food waste.

Rachel Bassler: Well, thank you, Mathy and Pete, for being with us today.

For more information about how you can reduce wasted food to benefit your wallet, community, and the environment visit www.epa.gov/foodrecovery. To learn more about the Food Recovery Challenge visit www.epa.gov/smm.